Tenant and resident militancy for housing justice:
an exchange between Amanda Huron and Neil Gray

Amanda Huron
University of the District of Columbia

Neil Gray
University of Glasgow

Abstract

Contact:
amanda.huron@gmail.com
and **neil.gray@glasgow.ac.uk**

In this conversation, RHJ editors have asked Amanda Huron and Neil Gray to reflect on their approach to strategies and histories of tenant and resident militancy and what lessons can be learnt from the past to shed light on contemporary housing struggles.

Amanda Huron, author of *Carving Out the Commons: Tenant Organizing and Housing Cooperatives in Washington, D.C.* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018) is Associate Professor of interdisciplinary social sciences at the University of the District of Columbia, the public university serving the city of Washington, D.C. Her research interests are in urban geography, mapping for social justice, struggles over housing and the city, and the history of Washington, D.C. She serves on the board of Empower D.C., and organizes with the D.C. Federation of Limited-Equity Housing Cooperatives.

Neil Gray, editor of *Rent and its Discontents: A Century of Housing Struggle* (Rowman & Littlefield International, 2018) is a writer and researcher based at the University of Glasgow. His work currently focuses on four main strands: housing and housing movements, the structural role of devaluation in contemporary urban accumulation strategies, the spatialities of Italian autonomous Marxism, and the right to the city and its critique. He is an active member of Living Rent, Scotland Tenants' Union.

The past and the present

RHJ: Why do you think it is important to take a historical approach to contemporary rent issues? Did you feel that you were challenging orthodox histories of struggles? What makes tenants struggles important at this moment in time?

Amanda: It's critical to take a historical approach to tenants' rights questions, which is part of the reason, Neil, I think your book is so important! Our two books are quite different. Yours is an edited volume, with really a fantastic group of chapters, broadly inspired by the 1915 Glasgow rent strikes, examining rent struggles in Britain and Ireland, historic and contemporary. My book, *Carving out the Commons: Tenant Organizing and Housing Cooperatives in Washington, D.C.*, is much more narrow in scope. I focus on the experiences of low-income tenants in Washington, D.C. who have been able to collectively purchase their apartment buildings from their landlords and turn them into limited-equity cooperatives (LECs), thus removing their homes from the speculative market and creating long-term, affordable, stable, collective homeownership for themselves and their neighbors. I spend one chapter of the book documenting the history of the tenant organizing that led to a raft of anti-displacement laws enacted by the city in the late 1970s, among which is the law that gives tenants the right to purchase their buildings should their landlords choose to sell, which is the legal basis for tenant conversion to cooperative.

Neil: It is precisely the focused nature of your book, Amanda, which makes it so useful and interesting. It's true to say that *Rent and its Discontents* provides a more general survey; a primary aim was to uncover a diverse and hidden continuum of housing struggle in order to deepen understanding around contemporary housing struggle in Britain and Ireland. In the introduction, I provide a survey of housing movement struggles over the last century and the first section of the book reappraises the 1915 rent strikes in Glasgow, which helped force rent controls and eventually public housing in Britain for the first time. Undertaking the research, it soon became apparent that housing movements typically lack funding and institutional support and have been poorly documented. In the British context, the work of Dave Englander, Sean Damer, Charlie Johnstone, John Grayson, Quintin Bradley and others helped me piece together this neglected history. They show that progressive housing outcomes are not merely the result of enlightened policy decisions but are typically forced by the social pressure of direct action tenant movements. It is also important to stress that everyday, and often overlooked, tenant organization has been crucial to defending public housing against frequent phases of state retrenchment.

Amanda: Absolutely—these changes come from people organizing and direct action; and the history of this kind of action is often not known, even in our own local communities. In D.C., the history of struggles over land and housing have long intersected with struggles over racial justice. The city, in the years after the Civil War, became something of a mecca for Black Americans. It was the first major US city to become majority-Black, in 1957, and has long been a major hub of civil rights organizing. The first documented rent strike I've been able to find in the city took place in 1964—which is really quite late for the US, and certainly late compared to what you document in the UK! There was a

surge in tenant organizing in the city throughout the 1960s, mostly related to organizing for racial justice, and supported by groups like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), students at Howard University, and Black student groups at other local universities. That developed into quite a strong tenants' rights movement in the 1970s, which is really when the movement peaked. But what's exciting to me is that there is quite a lot of tenant organizing taking place in the city right now, and lots of people hungry to know more about our history in this regard. So, I'm excited to write more about this history, in the hopes that what I find may be useful for folks working today.

Neil: That D.C. narrative context illustrates the necessity of grasping particular socio-historical conditions for contemporary housing movements. I also think it's important to consider historical change more abstractly. In *Rent and its Discontents*, I questioned orthodox historical views that perceive housing issues as secondary to workplace struggles. If urbanization has become increasingly central to contemporary forms of capital accumulation, I argue, urban struggle must necessarily be central to challenging contemporary capitalist relations. As such, I am interested in how political consciousness develops around housing as a generalized site of anti-capitalist contestation. In *Carving out the Commons*, Amanda, you seek to de-romanticize urban commoning by framing it as a pragmatic act emerging from crisis, necessity, and specific socio-material contexts. This is a crucial starting point, yet for me a broader political consciousness around housing is necessary to overcome the ideology of homeownership, the co-option of collective/co-operative housing, and housing market speculation (all described as threats to the urban commons in your book). I wonder if you want to say more about this relation between action and political consciousness?

Amanda: Yes! Over the course of my research, I became really interested in the relationship—and sometimes lack thereof—I saw between people articulating a particular political consciousness on the one hand, and actually getting control over their housing on the other. While co-op leaders often expressed an explicit politics, many co-op members—people who were less in leadership roles—did not. But I think there's something to be gained from understanding people's raw need for the basics of life (food, housing, water), and their fights to get those things, as inherently political. We can have political consciousness-raising sessions all we want, but most people will pretty quickly stop coming to meetings if they're not getting anything tangible out of the process. So, there's a real immediate materiality, clearly, to housing organizing work.

The immediate materiality of this is pointed out by the authors representing the Scottish group *Living Rent*, who, in their chapter in your book, argue that 'tenant security is an essential precondition for successful organizing.' At first I was a bit flummoxed by that statement, because in my experience it seems that tenant *in*security is precisely what drives organizing. But I think their point is that people are hesitant to get involved in organizing if they fear it will cause them to lose their homes; which makes sense. The flip side of this, I found, is that when tenants gain a lot—i.e. actually gain control over their housing— they may step back from organizing. After all, no one wants to spend their lives fighting for their housing. Most people just want to be able to take their housing for granted: to

not think about it, to just assume that it will continue to be there. As one of my interviewees said (and she was and continues to be highly politically engaged in housing), she was attracted to the limited-equity co-op model because she saw it as a form of housing that would alleviate the biggest worry most people have, which is their housing. And then, as she saw it, people would be free to pursue the other important work they wanted to do in the world—because they wouldn't be worried about their housing. But in fact, as I point out in the book, starting a limited-equity co-op with her fellow tenants was in fact the beginning of a whole new set of housing worries! So, I'm interested in how the politics may change at that point.

Neil: Yes, the point *Living Rent* members were making is that without tenant security then housing contestation becomes very difficult because legislation typically supports the landlord over the tenant. In the British and Irish context, the privatization of housing has undermined security of tenure, with vast reductions in social housing increasing private landlordism. The less regulated and less welfare-oriented practice of the private rental sector has also led to greater exposure to rent arrears and eviction. Vickie Cooper and Kirsteen Paton's Chapter on the resurgence of UK evictions in *Rent and its Discontents* demonstrates this very clearly. What may differ between our contexts is that in Britain and Ireland security of tenure was once relatively strong but must now be defended from erosion, while in the US, the struggle may be more about instantiating security of tenure in the first place. This, I think, speaks to the relative nature of demands within different institutional conjunctures.

On the relation between immediate pragmatic concerns, more systemic issues, and wider political consciousness, I see no necessary contradiction between developing collective political consciousness and working around the immediate needs of tenants—though I do recognize the issues you raise. My tenants' union, *Living Rent Scotland*, for instance, expressly seeks to develop tenant knowledge and capacity through collective member defense around the specific material concerns that tenants or union members raise. The problem, as I see it, is that the satisfaction of basic housing needs—however important, necessary, and difficult to achieve—cannot fully address the systemic problems of the housing market. Such problems are already heavily influenced by existing right-wing ideology, as Hamish Kallin and Tom Slater's Chapter in *Rent and its Discontents* lucidly demonstrates. As *Living Rent* and the Dublin Tenants' Association (DTA) lament, a lack of collective political understanding and organization constrain wider challenges to housing injustice. In my experience, this issue is often framed in terms of the contradictions of 'service provision' over the construction of informed collective capacity. This, for me, is why conscious political critique and praxis must be central, better internal, to any transformative emancipatory project.

Tenant identity

RHJ: How do you define the tenant in relation to housing and urban dynamics? Which understandings do you draw on for your definition of renting? How do you perceive the identity of the tenant?

Neil: *Rent and its Discontents* can be considered a tenant 'history-from-below'; a deliberate attempt to contest the domination of policy literature in housing research and the privileging of landlords in housing law and discourse. A formative political process for me personally was my involvement in an anti- housing stock transfer campaign in Edinburgh in 2006. Housing stock transfer is a heavily contested form of third-way privatization, at a borough or city-wide level, that has been central to undermining public housing in Britain. That campaign helped prevent 23,000 public housing homes being transferred *en masse* to a special purpose Housing Association. This experience confirmed to me that tenant campaigns are both essential and winnable, because housing security and costs shape everyone's lives profoundly.

At a more theoretical level, I tend to frame the housing question within the particular material political-economic conjuncture of de-industrialization, urbanization and rentier capitalism: seeking to comprehend the subjective behavior of 'the tenant' as an immanent, potentially disruptive figure in contemporary capitalist relations. Finally, in terms of identity, women have been major (if often hidden) protagonists in housing struggle and a central objective of the book was to recognize this contribution while emphasizing the potential for expanding the composition of (and shaping the practice of) contemporary housing movements through a social reproductive lens.

Amanda: *Carving out the Commons* is a bit different in that while it's about tenant organizing, it's primarily about the housing cooperatives those tenants organized to create, which then rendered them no longer tenants, as they then became cooperative owners of their homes. So, the subjectivity of 'the tenant' changes. I was really intrigued in your book by the distinction Michael Byrne draws between 'organizing tenants' and 'organizing *as* tenants.' Organizing tenants, as he writes, implies organizing 'from the outside,' or organizing 'others,' perhaps as a job (and this is important work: we need more paid tenant organizers!). But organizing *as* tenants implies that everyone is in this together: we are all tenants, and we need to work together to struggle for housing. This is a powerful concept, in that it implies solidarity and mutual aid. I'm currently part of a group of LEC members who are trying to create a citywide federation of limited-equity co-ops, so we're working on organizing not as tenants, but as co-op members. But part of the idea is to be in solidarity with tenants, particularly with tenants who would like to buy their building from their landlords and turn them into co-ops! And, like Byrne, I think there's something powerful in organizing *as* co-op members, rather than us 'being organized' by an outside organization—not that I don't think outside support isn't critically important. So, along these lines, my question for you, Neil, is—in our housing movement work, do we want to destroy the subjectivity of 'the tenant,' and replace it with something else? Or do we want to encourage tenant militancy? Of course, we could pursue both approaches at once…

Neil: A central assertion in *Rent and its Discontents* is that tenants in Britain and Ireland are primary agents of change in housing transformation, but it is important to stress the particularity of my analysis. The context is quite different in the US, but could we say that shifting the balance of forces from private to more collective forms of ownership might provide a broader common objective? If so, it currently appears that the tenant has more desire for *systemic change* than the homeowner. In Italy and Spain, the promotion of homeownership has historically been an important ideological factor for Fascist regimes, and in the UK it was famously central to the Thatcherite Conservative government's neoliberal electoral victory in 1979. LECs and other forms of homeownership complicate this picture, but as it stands the renter seems structurally more antagonistic to existing relations than the homeowner. Tenants have less investment in private property and therefore less to lose; especially given spiraling mortgage debt. For these reasons, I think the tenant will remain a crucial fulcrum in any transformation of housing conditions. But different contexts require different responses and different forms of tenure are related within a wider housing problematic. This is why I think cross-tenure organizing is an important concept.

Amanda: It seems clear that what we're interested in both cases in de-commodifying housing and creating new forms of housing/home that move beyond the tenant/landlord relationship. It seems critical therefore to continue to develop tenant militancy, while always working towards possible 'post-tenant' futures. I wanted to circle back to your point, Neil, about the often unacknowledged role women have played in tenant organizing. In D.C., most of these women organizers have historically been Black women. For a number of D.C. co-op members—particularly for older members who started co-ops back in the late 1970s and early 80s—their position as Black people in Washington, D.C. informed how they saw their struggles to take control of their housing. One woman talked to me explicitly about how she moved to D.C. because 'it was Chocolate City, it was the place to be!'—and she was very proud that she had been able to work with her fellow Black tenants to take ownership over a piece of that city. So, there's an interesting relationship here between Black identity and the desire for collective control of resources, which Jessica Gordon Nembhard plumbs in her great book, *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice.* This is not to say that white people and men have not played important roles in D.C. co-op organizing, too, but that more often it's women of color doing this work; increasingly this includes immigrant women. I think it's important to pay attention to how those different identities shape people's experiences in the world, and how they can shape their approach to organizing for control over their housing.

Rent

RHJ: How do you understand and conceptualize 'rent' in your analysis? Can rent ever be part of an emancipatory project or demand?

Neil: In *Rent and its Discontents*, the main focus was housing movements rather than rent *per se*. However, I am convinced that a theory of rent should be foregrounded more in critical urban analysis, relating housing rent to other forms of economic rent (such as monopoly rent and land rent) and periodizing the phenomenon of rent to better understand how it articulates with the contemporary housing question. In my understanding, housing rent operates as a contested variable between landlord and tenant much as the wage does between worker and boss. At the same time, rent is related to the cost of land and other economic factors, and therefore must be understood within a wider totality of capitalist relations and political contestation. My edited book covers rent control and/or rent strike movements in some detail, but these movements also had wider political relevance since they were often also about defending the value of the wage. One statistic quoted in the book is that the average tenant in England now spends more than 50 per cent of their net wage on rent, and in London up to 70 per cent. This one fact alone illustrates the pressing need for organized rent struggle. One thing that was striking for me in your account of urban commoning in D.C., Amanda, is that you describe how some public housing tenants have chosen collectively to transform their blocks into LECs, with state assistance, thus in practice transforming themselves from tenants into shared equity property owners. What is it in the D.C. context that led them to do this, and what kind of implication does this have for tenant struggles around rent?

Amanda: First I should say that in the vast majority of cases, D.C. tenants are transforming privately rented housing into limited-equity co-ops—there is only one case I am aware of (which is featured in the book) in which tenants transformed public housing into an LEC; and that was a highly unusual case. So generally, what we are talking about with these co-ops is market-rate private rental housing being removed from the market in order to create these co-ops.

Still, I think the case of the D.C. LECs points to some really important questions about struggles over rent. In a typical landlord/tenant scenario, as you point out, rent is the point around which tenants and landlords battle. But in my book, I'm looking at renters who, through much struggle, collectively purchased their apartment complexes and thus became cooperative members and collective owners of their homes. Once tenants are able to purchase their homes, they no longer pay 'rent.' Limited-equity co-op members must charge themselves monthly fees, called 'carrying charges,' in order to cover the mortgage on the building and the costs of repairs and utilities. Co-op leaders and more politically aware members tend to eschew the term 'rent.' They reject the term because they equate paying 'rent' with being a 'tenant' and they want to emphasize that they are *not* tenants anymore. They have a pride of ownership and they want to emphasize it. They are constantly reminding their fellow co-op members that they are no longer tenants, that they are owners, that they must not 'act like tenants,' and that to refer to these monthly payments as 'rent' is to slide back into what is often referred to as a 'tenant mentality'— by which is usually meant, I'm sorry to say, a mentality of disempowerment and failure to take responsibility for one's home.

Neil: Again, the differing socio-material contexts are important here! It is notable that you describe how some LEC apartment owners reject the identity and 'mentality' of the tenant. The latter is highly variable in my experience, but negative views of tenant life in Britain and Ireland, I would argue, are shaped by the prevailing ideology of homeownership; the residualization and quite venomous stigmatization of public housing; and the fact that private renting is currently the worst of all tenure options in terms of cost and security. As such the question is already inherently politicized. The problem, it seems to me, is to provide quality, socialized and de-commodified housing solutions as genuine systemic alternatives. Such models remain widespread in Europe, albeit in undermined and imperfect form, and were common in the UK before being vastly reduced from 1979 onward. So there is reason to believe that the dichotomy between owner and tenant mentalities need not always be so entrenched.

Amanda: This is tough in the US. The ideology of individual homeownership has been quite strongly developed here, essentially to the point of equating homeownership with citizenship. The ideology of the American Dream asserts that anyone can become middle class, and homeownership is seen as an essential component of being middle class. So, I wonder the degree to which US tenants see their status as 'tenants' as temporary, that they'll soon enough somehow be able to buy a home of their own and leave renting behind. Of course, there are lots of examples of tenant militancy in individual US cities, but more broadly I do think that part of the challenge to tenant organizing in the US is the very strong ideology of individual homeownership that pervades the country.

Enemies and allies

RHJ: In the struggles that you studied, who were the enemies and who the allies? Have they changed over time, and if so how?

Neil: For tenants in Britain and Ireland, I would say, the enemies are everywhere! Housing movements address a current conjuncture where housing is a *primary* vehicle for contemporary capital accumulation strategies. This is quite distinct from the situation faced in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, where manufacturing was the dominant mode of accumulation and the provision of public housing could serve for capitalists as an important (though reluctantly given) cost factor in the reproduction of the worker for capitalist industrial relations. This was one of the key contradictions of the social democratic housing welfare system in Europe—as it was in the liberal democratic US according to Madden and Marcuse's excellent book, *In Defense of Housing*. Yet, important social gains were undoubtedly achieved within this framework. However, it's important to recognize that this social democratic context no longer prevails, and we should not underestimate the challenge housing movements currently face.

If capital and its restless desire for profit are characterized as the principal enemy here, capital is of course an abstraction, though a real one, that is personified in many different ways (and with the deepening financialization of housing this is increasingly complex to trace). However, in Britain, it is increasingly private landlords (and their agents) and

Housing Associations (HAs) who are viewed as the principal enemies. A focus on the private rented sector is welcome since struggles around public housing (which were most common previously) are no longer sufficient following a very definite housing privatization process. At the same time, HAs are now the main providers of social housing in Britain, and we are beginning to see a more sustained critique of how they function as providers of market mediated forms of housing, including private sale, mid-market rent, shared equity and so-called 'affordable' housing (pegged at 80 per cent of market rates), rather than social rent.

Such shifts in conceptualizing 'the enemy' are welcome, but the state remains the central intermediary of housing policy and housing privatization. If demands for public housing remain mute, then current housing movements fall behind even the most basic social democratic demands. Even with its numerous contradictions, in my view public housing still offers the most universal system-changing proposition for de-commodifying the housing market. This should not preclude the proposal of alternative models of housing, but these have historically remained marginal in Britain and Ireland, sitting alongside a burgeoning private housing market rather than challenging it *per se.* You observe that LECs provide only one per cent of housing in D.C. Do you think there are possibilities to expand this ratio? Or, are other forms of public, social or co-operative housing required?

Amanda: There are some efforts right now to expand the number of LECs in D.C.— I'm part of a task force our City Council has put together to come up with recommendations on exactly this. But I think LECs will only ever be a small piece of the picture. I agree that what we really need is more public housing. This feels like a distant dream in the US right now—not that we shouldn't still fight for it! We also need to fight for real rent control in jurisdictions across the US, and strengthen it in the relatively few jurisdictions, like D.C., where it already exists. And of course, we need to support direct action like rent strikes— which are starting to pick up in D.C. these days!

In terms of enemies: I think the enemies are similar across our different contexts. But what I think is particularly interesting is how that question of 'the enemy' shifts when tenants get what they want and take power over their own housing. When tenants in D.C. organized to take control of their homes through collective purchase and removed them from the speculative market, they—and several people I interviewed used exactly this language—became their own landlords. In some cases, their dire financial straits required them to raise their own rents (now called, as noted above, 'carrying charges'). In some cases, they had to evict people who were not paying those charges, or who were being destructive to the co-op in other ways. It's not quite that they became their own enemy. In many cases, they exhibited profound benevolence towards each other. For example, in two of the co-ops where I conducted interviews, tenants banded together to lend, and in some cases give, each other money in order to help the lowest-income among them remain in the housing as they converted to cooperative ownership. But the question of who the 'enemy' is becomes much murkier, and this leads to a question. What happens

when tenants manage to get collective ownership and control over their dwelling space? When there's no longer a clear outside enemy, how does struggle continue?

I think this question also speaks to your excellent chapter, Neil, on Engels' *The Housing Question*. From one perspective, these co-ops are just a creative way to provide homeownership to the working classes. But from another perspective, they can be seen as more transformative, striking at the root of the relationship between 'property' and 'home.' In a sense, they are an example of what many people are fighting for all over the world: dweller control of housing that has been removed from the speculative market, that is valued for the way it directly supports life and not for its potential exchange on the market, and is governed democratically by its members. So, my question for you, Neil: how you would view these co-ops through the lens of your take on *The Housing Question*?

Neil: The complexities you point to appear in a different way in Britain and Ireland's housing markets. Many working-class people are homeowners and landlords since property ownership currently represents a central form of economic security and wealth asset, especially when public housing is not easy to attain. The right-to-buy phenomenon in Britain is key here. Over two million former tenants have bought their public housing homes at massively subsidized prices since 1980, transforming tenants into owners, landlords, and market speculators whilst simultaneously decreasing the extent of public housing and increasing its cost. Such processes complicate easy characterizations of middle-class landlords with capital exploiting working-class tenants without—though that distinction remains structurally important.

The point I was trying to make in my Chapter on *The Housing Question* is that Engels' position on housing as a secondary contradiction in the 1870s was influenced by an historically specific tendency in Marxist-inspired thought when manufacturing was becoming increasingly hegemonic. Industry was deemed to form the primary contradiction in capitalist relations and was thus framed as the main site of struggle. My argument, in simplified form, is that this position requires reconsideration in the current de-industrialized context, where housing features as a central pillar of many national economies. I like your point that LECs strike at the assumed relation between 'home' and 'property', and it is important to be clear here: Marx and Engels sought to supersede private property relations, and capitalism more generally, but such ambitions are of course historically determinate and necessarily processual. So, for me some relevant questions might include: How can the de-commodification of housing occur? What forms and processes can make this happen? How do these forms and processes relate to the wider totality of social relations? Does the call for public housing simply re-instate a mediated form of state capitalism? Or effectively mediate the market and provide breathing space for more radical propositions? Do LECs, or other shared equity alternatives, contribute to the de-commodification of housing? Or maintain the ideology of property and homeownership, while remaining subject to recuperation? The answers to these questions are not given in advance, but clarifying the intention is vital. For me, that means configuring housing activism as a central form of anti-capitalist organizing within a wider struggle over the terrain of social reproduction.

Housing and home

RHJ: Do people fight for housing or home? Were the struggles you examined more responsive or propositional, and what was the relationship between these two modes?

Amanda: When people I interviewed talked about their 'housing,' they invariably meant more than the box of their apartment. They were very focused on where those boxes were located in relation to the rest of their life needs. They had built up a life around the location of their housing which meant that they were thinking more in terms of simply shelter. They wanted to stay in their specific neighborhoods, in the places where they had strong social networks. So, in a sense this question is really about social reproduction: 'housing' is the thing that provides shelter, while 'home' exists at the intersection of dense networks of everyday life needs and responsibilities. As a researcher, I am ultimately more interested in home than in housing. But most people need housing in order to create home. I've spent a lot of time researching housing in the pursuance of a world where people can live in freedom and ease, at home. Neil, I'm curious what role the concept of 'home' plays in your work, and the work of the authors in your book.

Neil: Firstly, I agree that tenants connect home, neighborhood and social networks. In my experience many public/social housing tenants also insist on the term 'home' as a defensive and critical response to common conceptions characterizing social housing as dehumanized 'units'. Returning to tenant identity, many social housing tenants, including myself, my partner and my son are attached to and fond of our homes but very aware that our experience of everyday life on housing estates or the run-down areas where public/social housing often exists, is heavily stigmatized. 'Home' then denotes a place that is cared for and saturated with personal history, experience, emotion and the difficulties and complexities of everyday life. It signifies that public/social housing tenants believe their homes are neither something to escape from nor something destined to perish under the demolition expert's cruel calculus, but something valued and necessary. On the other hand, there is a distinct tendency in Britain and Ireland for new-build social housing to replicate the traditional private family home with driveway, front and back garden and physical separation from neighbors. Apart from the fact that I generally dislike the pseudo-Arcadian atomized nature of such schemes, whenever they develop (often replacing high-rise, high-density public housing in the British context), I always look for the numbers! How many public/social housing 'units' have been demolished overall? How many new 'social housing units' are for actual social rent? What is the tenure mix? How many homes for private, mid-market or shared equity housing? The statistics, in this case, matter a lot because they relate to how many people can actually access or afford housing, or a home if you will, and how the social housing market is being re-shaped and privatized. So, for me, it is important to maintain some kind of tension between notions of home and housing, thinking quality and quantity simultaneously.

The commons

RHJ: We are curious to hear your thoughts on the relationship between rent and the commons, both current and potential.

Neil: In my edited book, Tim Joubert and Stuart Hodkinson propose a mix of defensive/offensive commoning. Defensive commoning relates to defending existing public/social housing as a mediated bulwark against privatization, even if such forms may be imperfect. Offensive commoning refers to the production of new models of de-commodified housing, and direct housing democracy, beyond what is already present. Amanda, I wonder what you think of this framework? Also, in your book I appreciate that you raise the difficulty of urban commoning, challenging, in my view, certain idealist tendencies in the theorization of anti-capitalist commoning. This allows you to realistically address the problems of finding solidarity with strangers in high density urban areas; to grapple with the financialized city as a site of surplus value extraction; and to confront the role of the state in the planning and regulation of the city. You are also careful to stress that LECs exist in tension with the wider landscape of housing markets and are often outside the affordability range of many, yet you sometimes describe LECs as 'non-capitalist' or 'decommodified' entities. The latter is an achievement in itself of course, but strictly speaking I would characterize LECs, as you describe them, as partly de-commodified housing existing within a capitalist market, albeit mediated by co-operative structures. Can you clarify your stance on this?

Amanda: Yes, you're right that LECs are not completely de-commodified housing — to be more accurate, we might call them 'less commodified housing,' or better, non-speculative housing. The housing has been removed from the speculative market—as long as it exists as an LEC, that housing cannot be sold for a profit. They are not fully de-commodified, but they can get pretty darn close. But, to commoning. I found Joubert and Hodkinson's chapter on rent strikes and the urban commons to be quite intriguing. I like the typology of defensive/offensive commoning, which in my book I frame instead as maintaining/expanding the commons. One thing I point out in the book—because my co-op interviewees pointed it out to me—is that there is a dialectical relationship between maintaining (or 'defending') the commons, and expanding the commons (or engaging in 'offensive' commoning). I think this is a key point.

I think what Joubert and Hodkinson's chapter also opens up for us is in the need to put housing struggles into a larger context: we can't look at housing in isolation. It must be seen as part of a larger struggle over social reproduction: as part of a struggle for the means of life itself. Neil, I know this is one of the key points you are making in your book. I like, for instance, how Sarah Glynn in her chapter on public housing emphasizes that the struggle for public housing must be part of a larger eco-socialist struggle. In my book I focus on a specific manifestation of urban commoning—limited-equity housing cooperatives—because I wanted to look closely at the specific machinations of a commoning practice, and the challenges and joys of it. I thought looking closely at this example could help us understand urban commoning more broadly, but the key is really to expand our understanding of the commons out to encompass struggles for life while

staying grounded in the material realities of particular places and people. Thinking about potentials for commoning more broadly, I'm intrigued by the possibilities for cross-tenure organizing that comes up in Glynn's chapter and others. I think I like the idea of organizing across tenure, but how do we do it? Neil, you address this some in the book's afterword, but I'd be really curious to hear more of your thoughts about the possibilities for organizing across tenure.

Neil: Firstly, yes, I think those definitions of LECs are more accurate. Also, Tim Joubert and Stuart Hodkinson, like you, stress the dialectical relation between defensive and offensive communing, and I agree this is vital. Cross-tenure housing organization, in my understanding, refers to activism that combines the experience of private sector tenants, public/social housing tenants, asylum seekers, squatters, homeless populations, co-operative members and other more marginal housing experiences. I take the term to designate a recognition that the housing system overall is in dire need of transformation and that the experience of different tenures is inter-related and co-dependent and must therefore not be treated in isolation. I think the term also relates to the changing demographics of housing tenure in Britain and Ireland. Where once tenant organizing was fixated on public/social housing, now that private sector rental accommodation is approximately equivalent in numbers (something unthinkable forty years ago), there has been an urgent response to changing housing conditions. But this defines the issue rather than responding to your pertinent question about how we might organize across tenures. My tenants' union, *Living Rent*, are still trying to work this out. Resources are one major issue, but for me what is interesting is that this question is increasingly being posed, even if answers have not yet been found, since the union refuses to treat specific housing tenures in isolation. One thing that is notably absent in this framework, however, is that homeownership is rarely seen as a position from which to organize. This problem requires much more attention since private home ownership is the tenure form that most people currently experience and is the one most inextricably bound up with the economy in terms of personal assets and mortgage debt.

Amanda: When thinking about cross-tenure organizing, it seems that the Spanish Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH) (Platform for People Affected by Mortgages) struggle, referenced by several of your authors, is instructive. PAH originated not in organizing tenants but in the struggles of middle-class people who had lost their homes to foreclosure. It forces us to see housing in its broader financialized context; to see that it's not just about struggle between landlords and tenants, but struggles over how land and housing is valued, who has a right to land, and how we can create forms of home that are not at risk of eviction *or* foreclosure.

Neil: That's an important point about the PAH movement. However, in recent discussions with people close to that situation, some doubts are being expressed about the limits of organizing with homeowners in lieu of sufficient attention to other forms of tenure. Without public housing and adequate welfare provision the ideology of homeownership will remain central in Spain. Meanwhile, less attention has been paid to the thousands of families, who have been forced to occupy vacant buildings due to escalating rent and

eviction levels in the private rental sector. This is not to deny the value of PAH, but rather to re-iterate the need for cross-tenure thinking and organizing and to reconsider how housing struggle might relate to wider forms of struggle around social reproduction and de-commodification.

Amanda: Yes. And I think the framework of the commons is useful in this effort, for two reasons: 1) the idea of the commons as collectively governed resources that are used to directly sustain life, not for exchange on the market, seems to describe our vision for more just housing; and 2) the emphasis on *commoning* as a social practice that we can collectively learn to navigate seems to describe a process we can, and are, undergoing in our organizing. This is one of the important conclusions in my book: that struggling for housing provides the opportunity to practice the urban commons, and that collective struggle for housing may then inform other struggles over social reproduction and life more broadly. There is work to do here, but it seems that there is also a lot of enthusiasm and drive—in the UK, the US, and around the world—to do this work. I'm excited for what we might be able to create.